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The problem of power in Russia

SEPTEMBER 7, 2022 **GEOFFREY HOSKING**

THEMES: **RUSSIA**

Russia has never quite reconciled its traditional culture of 'joint responsibility' with the rule of law.

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russian farmers

The open, flat heartlands of northern Eurasia were both Russia's burden and her opportunity. Once

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difficult. Add to that the fact that the huge territories were inhabited by very diverse peoples, with different languages, customs, laws and religions, and it will be seen that any state ruling over them had a very difficult and complex task to accomplish. That is the basic problem which Russia's successive rulers have had to solve.

In actual fact, the Tsarist Russian state coped with it very well, especially considering the relatively primitive state of its political development and the enormous distances over which it had to rule. The key to success was the symbolic projection of strong state authority through the imagery of Tsar and Orthodox Church, combined with strong local communities able to fulfil the tasks which in most European countries fell to intermediate institutions.

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Village and urban communities had to carry out many of the functions of the state, which the state itself was unable to accomplish because of poor communications. They had to keep the peace by policing their area, curtailing feuds between families, apprehending, judging and punishing peace-breakers and criminals. (*Mir* – peace – was used as a term to designate village communities right into the twentieth century.) Under the system of *krugovaia poruka* (joint responsibility), they had to act together to ensure that taxes were paid and recruits delivered as necessary to the army. If one household failed to pay its taxes the others had to make up the difference; similarly, if a recruit from one household deserted or proved unfit for military service, a young man from another household had to be sent instead. The forum in which decisions were taken was the *skhod* or village assembly, in which each household was represented by its head, usually an older male. One of them would be

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or left the village would have land taken away – but would also pay lower taxes.

The system had many advantages. Joint responsibility (*krugovaia poruka*) minimised risk in a part of the world where agriculture could be marginal. It enabled the Russian state and the service nobles to carry out their functions with minimal expenditure and without even, in most cases, providing granaries and other facilities for times of dearth. On the whole it also guaranteed Russian peasants a modicum of land and kept them reasonably well-fed. The British Empire, by contrast, was built on a system of individual responsibility and individual property which worked out badly for the poor, many of whom were deprived of their land in the enclosures and some of whom finished their days in the workhouse.

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functions of rural life which compelled them to cooperate: access to common lands, the pasturing of livestock, social welfare facilities, the upkeep of roads, bridges and stores. Both poverty and wealth were frowned on: the indigent were a burden on the community, and the wealthy were suspected of having no real stake in it and of engaging in crooked practices which might cause problems for them all. As a popular saying had it, 'Wealth is a sin before God; poverty is a sin before one's fellow villagers.'

This system was remarkably successful. The basic functions of government were carried out. Non-Russians could be integrated into the empire by utilising their own personal power structures; often the indigenous elite would be coopted into the Russian nobility. The Russian Empire was one of the largest and most diverse in the history of the world. And Russia avoided the fate suffered by China,

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of Europe. The keystone was the abolition of serfdom. This gave peasants new rights, for example, to engage in the market, to hire out their labour power, to buy and sell property and to participate in local government above the level of the village. It also, however, deprived the nobles of their power over the peasants, which had hitherto been a vital link in the empire's capacity to mobilise resources. The government tried to fill that gap by creating law codes and new institutions – elected local government, law courts, schools and universities, a relatively free press, a conscript army, a national bank, a stock exchange. This was modernisation, and it meant urbanisation, industrialisation, the spread of a monetary economy, and conspicuous social polarisation. These abrupt changes provoked powerful demands from below, from workers and peasants, who valued their new opportunities, but were also vulnerable to exploitation in the more active, market-driven society created by the changes. They were glad to buy and sell land, yet they also assumed that a basic minimum of land

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own power network on those new institutions. Paradoxically, in the name of modernising, the Soviet Union restored the practices of personally mediated power, albeit in a very different form from those which had existed prior to the 1860s.

The foundation of the new 'power vertical' (as President Putin would later call it) was the nomenklatura system, under which all senior and responsible appointments were made in the state, the party, the armed forces, the professions, industry, agriculture, education – in fact in every branch of the economy. Party committees at all levels were instructed to keep up-to-date lists of employees suitable for responsible positions when they should fall vacant. That way the party could control all significant personnel appointments.

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security police. The upper-level official networks formed in this fashion symptomatically became known as ‘cadres’. Lower down, aspirant young people who needed higher education and a first job had to work hard at assigned politico-social tasks and fill in forms presenting their biographies in as attractive a light as possible, ready to go into those card-index files.

The Communist Party general secretary thus presided over the apex of an elaborate complex of card-index files reaching down to small town and village levels, whose information was constantly being replenished. The Communists might be trying to create a great new society, in which poverty and oppression would be forever eliminated. But they could not manage without personal fiefdoms reminiscent of Tsarist serfdom. The contrast between the great aim and the humble, even sordid means, helped to generate the supremely destructive crisis we normally call the ‘great terror’. Stalin

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In 1936-9 Stalin endeavoured to re-establish control by unleashing the NKVD on these local patron-client networks – and on some of their supreme patrons at the apex of the hierarchy too. This was a fundamental reason for the great terror, which soon took on a dynamic of its own. Rival patron-client networks fought each other with the weapons of police terror, which included prisons, labour camps and murder in the cellars of the Lubianka. Stalin exercised general supervision over the whole process, and often determined individual victims by signing lists brought to him each morning. But it transpired that he could not eradicate the recalcitrant networks, since they were inherent in the Communist system. He could murder individuals, but he could not overcome the paradoxical and destructive dynamic of personal power harnessed to a messianic cause. The nomenklatura elite as a body ultimately defeated and outlasted *him.*

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law was as deficient as ever.

The post-Stalin leaders decided to downgrade the role of terror in political control and instead to give the mass of the people a greater stake in the system. Khrushchev went so far as to denounce Stalin's terror as itself a deviation, caused by the 'cult of personality', from which the country was now returning to the 'correct' Leninist path. There were two main prongs to the desired transformation. One was to satisfy the people's material needs, above all by putting more food in the shops, providing more consumer goods and building millions of individual family apartments. The other was to encourage the 'withering away of the state' by fostering 'social self-administration.'

The key role in 'social self-administration' was to be played by the *kollektiv*, the workplace collective

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relieve the police of some of their burdens in preventing street hooliganism and providing cover for

to control the activities of the population, or even of their own party-state officials, through coercion and terror. They had decided to hand over much of their authority to the collectives of 'joint responsibility' which their regime had inherited and had inadvertently consolidated. Surveillance would now be mutual rather than hierarchical. Since the primary collective continued to provide access to the scarce material benefits of life, it could easily regulate much of the behaviour of its members and discipline or extrude those who did not conform. This applied throughout the social hierarchy, from collective farms to the departments of research institutes. Aleksandr Zinov'ev, a mathematician from the Institute of Philosophy, characterised the resulting communal way of life: 'At the level of the primary collective people not only work, they spend time in the company of people they know well. They swap news, entertain themselves, do all kinds of things to preserve and improve their position, have contacts with people on whom their well-being depends, go to

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methods.

That is the system which collapsed with the end of the Soviet Union. Yet parts of it are still recognisable, and are even being propped up and restored as the men from the 'power ministries' take control of major sectors of the economy. Once again power and ownership are poorly demarcated from each other, and employees look to the 'big man' to protect them and secure them life's benefits.

Today, however, this is not the only game in town. Russians are incomparably more open to the outside world than they were fifteen years ago. Many of them have travelled abroad and taken employment there. They are much more accustomed to financial and legal instruments and to

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